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SUBJECT: Aceh: Incoming Governor Blasts Syariah, Syariah Police
Crack Down

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1. (SBU) Summary: Aceh's incoming governor Irwandi Yusuf has publicly vowed to block new Syariah regulations, including a draft law to cut off the hands of convicted thieves, prompting Syariah officials to withdraw temporarily the proposed law pending revision. Meanwhile, out of the public eye Irwandi and his advisors are working on a plan to enlist moderate ulamas in an effort to rollback some of the existing Syariah rules. In late December the religious

police in Banda Aceh launched a crackdown on hair salons serving both male and female customers for "promoting inappropriate contact" between the sexes. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Asking an Acehnese if he supports Syariah law is like asking an American if he supports liberty and democracy; you know the answer you are going to get before you ask the question. The problem is in how it is defined. According to several Acehnese intellectuals as well as our own conversations around the province, a majority of Acehnese hold moderate views on the implementation of Syariah. Many say that, except in the case of crimes which the police seem powerless to stop such as corruption, it is best enforced within the family. In fact, one group of villagers professing adamant support for Syariah law near Kuala Langsa flatly refused to believe that people could be physically caned under existing regulations; caning, they insisted, was, and should be, "mental." Only a relative minority of Acehnese are thought to support vigorous enforcement of petty offences such as small-scale gambling. A solid majority of GAM members, including incoming governor Irwandi Yusuf, are in the former camp.
Incoming Governor Blasts Syariah

¶3. (SBU) Prior to the election Irwandi privately criticized Syariah law as "imposed by Jakarta" and blamed it for distorting traditional Acehnese culture and scaring off tourists and investors. Should he become governor he promised to reform Syariah enforcement and rollback the most extreme provisions. Not wishing to alienate any of Aceh's powerful ulamas before the election, however, he avoided discussing religious issues during the campaign.

¶4. (SBU) With the election over, however, Irwandi has become more open about his views. On multiple occasions he has blasted a draft law mandating that the hand of convicted thieves be amputated as "persecuting the poor" who steal to feed their families and vowed to block its implementation. According to Irwandi, Syariah's enforcers should focus on improving peoples' welfare and says that if any hands are to be cut off it should be the hands of "rich, corrupt officials".
Amputation Law Withdrawn

¶5. (SBU) Although he has not yet assumed office, Irwandi's criticisms are already having an effect. While downplaying Irwandi's influence, Syariah officials acknowledged to us recently that their plans to present the draft amputation law to the provincial legislature (DPR-D) in early 2007 have been set back; the law has now been shelved until they can write rules distinguishing between thieves who steal to feed their families and those motivated by greed. This rewrite will take about a year to complete.
Religious Police Launch New Crackdown

¶6. (U) At approximately the same time the Syariah Affairs Office was withdrawing the draft amputation law, the Syariah Police (waliyatul hisbah or WH) were launching a crackdown on cell phone vendors suspected of distributing pornography and on Banda's ubiquitous unisex beauty parlors. According to the WH Chief in Banda Aceh, these businesses were violating section two of Provincial Regulation number 14 of 2003 concerning inappropriate contact between members of the opposite sex. (Note: This section in the law forbids "inappropriate contact of unmarried couples, immorality, and filthy" as defines them as "activities, events, or situations that can lead to adultery." Some Acehnese have complained that the language is vague and grants excessive discretion to the WH.)

¶7. (SBU) The crackdown affected more than 30 salons and nearly a dozen cell phone vendors. In preparing to take action against the salons, the WH Chief said he had deputized elderly ladies from the neighborhood to monitor salons and report on their activities. He also said that the mayor's office had previously notified each of the salon owners in writing that they were suspected of violating applicable regulations and in jeopardy of losing their license. On the day of the crackdown, he said, persons working in the salons and their customers were "educated" about the regulations and released.

and will not be clearly identifiable as "Irwandi's plan", he hopes it will give him the political cover needed to implement genuine reform. Heffern